CHRISTIAN FREITAG

On how to be an environmental Jedi

Job: Executive Director, Sycamore Land Trust.
Location: Bloomington.
Education: B.S. in Political Science, Northwestern University; J.D., IU Maurer School of Law; Ph.D., IU School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA).
Hometown: Valparaiso.

John Maxwell photo

Christian Freitag poses behind the Sycamore Land Trust office, former home of environmental visionary Linton Keith Caldwell and his wife Helen, who donated it.

By Marty Benson, OI staff

The leader of one of the fastest-growing land trusts in the Midwest can't remember a time when he wasn't an environmentalist.

Realizing he could make a living being one took until his first year at IU's Maurer School of Law.

"I saw how truly crucial lawyers have been to the environmental movement," Christian Freitag said. "It's largely because of lawyers that the environment is a consideration in government decision making."

Choosing that path meant breaking ranks with his academic peers. Instead of interning for a law firm that summer, he found himself living in a bunkhouse of a family he didn't know, with no running water or electricity. In the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming.

He helped the Powder River Basin Resource Council get small-time cattle ranchers fair prices and keep their water safe.

The making-a-living part hadn't kicked in yet. He made $25 a week, essentially gas money.

Still, he loved it.

Admitting that "this is totally cheeseball," he paraphrased John Denver's song "Rocky Mountain High," saying, "I was born in the summer of my 22nd year."

The feeling came from more than Wyoming's natural beauty, which he said was "more bombastic" but not superior to his Monroe County surroundings. Many of the lessons he learned helped him become Sycamore's first and only executive director.

"That was probably the most important of all my professional experiences because it taught me that people are more the same than they are different, and it taught me to listen to a lot of different people," he said. "The ranchers I knew wanted clean air and water, and they loved wildlife and wilderness—they wanted the same things I did."

His learning continued the next summer, when he interned with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (now Earthjustice) in New Orleans, focusing on endangered species work in the Southeast.

"I didn't make much money there either, but I got trained by Jedis in the art of environmental law," he said.

His love of the outdoors came from his parents, even though both were originally Chicago people. But they raised their family in Valparaiso. Dad routinely drove Christian and his older brother the 15 minutes to the Indiana Dunes three or four times a week. Vacation trips were longer.

"It was loading up the old station wagon and going to Yellowstone or the Smoky Mountains," he said.

Shorter camping jaunts were to Brown County and Turkey Run state parks.

But most of his boyhood outdoor activities happened closer to home.

"Our parents would just tell us to go outside," he said. "We had very few rules. It was a different world.

"My mother would scream out the back door when it was dinnertime, but for the eight hours before that, we were wild people, going down to the gulley with toy army men, staging battles, throwing dirt clods at each other, turning over rocks."

After New Orleans, he passed the Indiana bar and landed a two-year clerkship in Indianapolis with then-Chief Justice Randall T. Shepard of the Indiana Supreme Court. From Shepard, he learned not just about the law, but "about the kind of person I wanted to be when I grew up."

Then Freitag went back to IU to work on a doctorate in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA).

"Being a professor seemed like it would be a good gig, a chance to teach other people how to be a Jedi," Freitag said.

In 2000, two people already filling that role at SPEA, Dan Willard and Vicky Meretsky, were on Sycamore's board of directors.

Grad student Freitag needed a part-time job. Sycamore needed its first part-time employee.

Until then, the organization had been all-volunteer. It was 10 years old. It had protected 500 acres. It worked in 12 counties. It had 200 members.

Freitag got the job.

"I saw that if we did things right, the recipe for land conservation in southern Indiana was great," he said. "There is no place else in the Midwest that has hardwood forest like southern Indiana."

Sycamore has now protected 20,000 acres. It works in 26 counties. Membership is 1,200.

Last year, Freitag hired its seventh full-time staff member.

In general, a land trust is a nonprofit that conserves land by acquiring it or by holding conservation easements, which are rights to limit how the land can be used.

"The idea of a land trust is that I can't buy 1,000 acres but a thousand of us can buy 1,000 acres," Freitag said.

Sycamore's work goes beyond what some land trusts do. It also manages active restoration projects, monitors wildlife and plant health, and builds trails on some public preserves.

"From the day I was hired, I've had three rules," Freitag said.

First is running Sycamore like a business, because "you can't do good unless you do well."

Second is staying out of politics.

"There is no reason that conservation should be just a liberal thing," he said. "It's been played out that way in the last generation or so, but, hey, 'conservation' is 'conservative' by definition.

"What we do should appeal to everybody, whether you are conservative or liberal or anything else."

The third is that Sycamore can't go looking for fights.

"We stay positive, particularly at a time when everybody seems to be at everyone else's throats," he said.

He's pleased with Sycamore's accomplishments in its 28 years but has higher goals.

"One of the best things you can do for species is give them space, especially as they're going to need to adapt to a new climate reality in the coming years," Freitag said.

To do so, he wants to connect habitat corridors throughout southwest Indiana—imagine linking Goose Pond Fish & Wildlife Area to Patoka River National Wildlife Refuge and the Lower Wabash River area. Landscape-scale conservation.

"Nature is incredibly resilient, and humans are vastly intelligent," he said, quoting British anthropologist Jane Goodall. "That is hope.

"It may take 50 years and cost $300 million, and so be it. If we could do something like that, we're not just changing southern Indiana, we're changing North America.

"Why not us? Why not now?"

Freitag has always considered himself an environmentalist, and now he gets paid to be one.

But he thinks everyone else is an environmentalist, too. And they don't need to become a Jedi to make a difference.

"Most people want clean air and clean water. And most people want their kids to have the chance to live in a beautiful, healthy place."

He says one way to make that happen is spending $40 to become a member of Sycamore Land Trust *(syacamorelandtrust.org).* □

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Submitted photo

Brothers Jason and Christian (right) Freitag sat still long enough for their dad to take this shot during a 1976 family outing to Brown County State Park.